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SUBJECT: MEXICO'S "OTHER HALF"--THE VIEW FROM OAXACA (PART
ONE IN TWO PART SERIES)

REF: MEXICO 3962

¶1. (SBU) On August 1-4, poloff visited the state of Oaxaca in order to learn more about the political and economic dynamics of this region, often characterized as part of Mexico's poor "other half." Academics, journalists, protesters, and indigenous citizens described a state--until recently a PRI stronghold--that is marginalized within Mexico, neglected by the federal government, exploited by the wealthy, and manipulated by state politicians. Our contacts concurred that the election of a PRD-dominated state congress reflects more anger towards the governor and disillusionment with the PRI and PAN than deep-felt loyalty to the PRD. Support for Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) is driven by this disillusionment and by AMLO's identification with indigenous groups and promises to help the disadvantaged. This is the first of a two-part series. End summary.

Political discontent

¶2. (SBU) The volatile situation in Oaxaca City, where thousands of teachers have linked with civil society organizations and radical groups to demand better wages and the overthrow of the discredited governor, Ulises Ruiz, offers a glimpse of this region's broader political, economic, and social challenges (see septel). Although there are significant differences between and within the Oaxacan capital and coastal regions, which normally benefit from high levels of tourism, and rural indigenous communities, which are impoverished and subject to high rates of migration, Oaxacans share common experience living in Mexico's second poorest state which, until the most recent elections, has been dominated by the PRI.

¶3. (SBU) Poloff's interlocutors explained that Oaxacans generally feel resentful toward their state political leaders and let down by the federal government. The PRI years ago lost support among the majority of this population, but was able to remain in power through its grip on political institutions. Its bruising defeat in the state election parallels the PRI's historic losses at the federal level. The PAN has never had a strong foothold in Oaxaca and is perceived by many here as disinterested in this region. On July 2, many Oaxacans voted for the PRD as part of a collective "vote of punishment" against the PRI and PAN.

Anger towards the PRI governor

¶4. (SBU) Oaxaca's PRI governors have left a legacy of

corruption, repression, and ineffectiveness. Resentment towards the present governor is strongest in Oaxaca City, especially following his decision to use force against the striking teachers and their sympathizers on June 14 (reftel).

The various groups, apparently including radical elements, that have since come together to form a statewide protest are bound by the common objective of overthrowing Ruiz, and feel the only way to get him to step down is through non-institutional means. However, these groups appear to represent no broader movement that links their objectives with AMLO's national electoral challenge.

15. (SBU) Poloff's discussions with people outside the capital revealed greater ambivalence about the governor, since many rural Oaxacans have grown accustomed to expecting little from their state government. When indigenous communities engage in politics, their focus is usually local and based on custom rather than party politics. State politics are followed to the extent that governors have power over funding and political influence over the municipalities. The general impression in rural areas is that the governor takes money for himself and PRI political campaigns, leaving little to develop the economy.

Disappointment with the PAN

16. (SBU) At the federal level, many Oaxacans put their hopes in the Fox administration for a promise of change they believe never materialized. The president's perceived lack of concern for the southern and especially indigenous areas of Mexico has led to widespread disillusionment and a sense that the PRI and PAN have by design and through incompetence

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neglected Mexico's poorest regions. Although Fox's "oportunidades" poverty-reduction program has helped some families in Oaxaca, it has not made a sufficient difference in combating poverty to alter the widespread view that the PAN doesn't care enough about the poor. "Calderon promises jobs for us, but so did President Fox. After six years of waiting without results, we are ready for a change," a Mixteca man told poloff.

17. (SBU) The PAN was also hurt by a notion among many here that President Fox should have supported Oaxaca's protesters when the governor used force against them, or at least ordered an investigation into the state's actions. That Fox responded by saying it was an internal matter in which the federal government would not get involved may have cost the PAN votes. Although supporters of the Fox administration say the president respected state sovereignty by not intervening, numerous protestors felt it was the federal government's responsibility to protect them against what they viewed as state repression.

18. (SBU) The people with whom poloff spoke believe that neither the PRI nor PAN has formulated a convincing economic development strategy for the south. Disadvantaged citizens assess that since Fox didn't help them, Calderon would not either. This calculation is buttressed by a perception that the PAN takes its cues from Mexico's northern industrialized states and privileged classes. Their explanation for the perceived neglect of Mexico's south is an underlying racism against indigenous people and their way of life. "We are a menace to the government, which would rather focus on the rich half of Mexico and forget we exist," a Zapotec student told poloff in a comment emblematic of the discontent.

Support for the PRD and AMLO

19. (SBU) Support for the PRD remains shallow in Oaxaca. The academic dean of Oaxaca's Benito Juarez Autonomous University told poloff that the PRD has not had time to develop a widespread following, has lacked strong leaders, and has

little track record of effectiveness in Oaxaca. Furthermore, most rural communities are disinterested in party politics. The people's attention is directed not at the PRD but at Lopez Obrador, whose charisma, promises to attack poverty, identification with Mexico's indigenous and disadvantaged populations, and social programs from his time as mayor of Mexico City, have resonated with much of the state.

¶10. (SBU) Most Oaxacans believe AMLO would pay more attention to them than would the other presidential candidates.

"During the campaign, AMLO staged impressive visits to the south, while Calderon talked to us through the television," a teacher in Oaxaca City's central square told poloff. In the same square where the current protest continues, a Mixteca woman talked about the significance of AMLO's campaign phrase, "the indigenous are Mexico's most intimate truth," which she told poloff resonated in the hearts of many indigenous people. She added that she didn't recall any of the other candidates mentioning the indigenous during the presidential campaign (Note: although other candidates did refer to Mexico's indigenous people during the campaign, it was less frequent and less recognized than AMLO's references.

It should be noted that early in his career, AMLO spent several years as the head of the Indigenous Institute of Tabasco, during which time he lived in indigenous villages, burnishing his credentials as an indigenous rights activist. End note).

AMLO will save our identity

¶11. (SBU) Numerous Oaxacans have the impression that among the presidential candidates AMLO would be the most likely to safeguard Oaxaca's traditional way of life, especially that of indigenous communities. Globalization is a concept that remains new, frightening, and confusing in rural areas, and AMLO has played on people's fears. Many of the poor, especially farmers, are resentful about the way Mexico has been opened to the outside world and believe that globalization contributes to their economic underdevelopment and isolation. They are also inclined to believe AMLO's accusations of an elections fraud in which the political establishment has been rigged against them.

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¶12. (SBU) Within intellectual circles, there's also a conviction that Oaxaca's rich indigenous and colonial heritage needs to be protected from a threatening "Americanization." Acclaimed Oaxacan artist Francisco Toledo, who led a protest against the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in the state capital, is an influential voice of concern. The PAN has been stereotyped as not being sufficiently interested in culture, while the PRD has tried to garner an image as custodian of Mexico's indigenous cultural patrimony.

¶13. (SBU) Responding to a question about whether AMLO's proposed development strategies seem economically viable, the academic dean of Oaxaca's university quietly said "no." His assessment is an educated view not shared by many in rural areas, who have put their faith in AMLO's economic promises. At the same time, the dean-himself an AMLO supporter-characterized Obrador as the people's best chance for a better future, because Mexico's other political leaders have "largely forgotten them."

Some disagree with AMLO's approach

¶14. (SBU) Not all Oaxacans favor the PRD or AMLO, and there are important vestiges of support for the PRI and PAN within Oaxaca City and some of the state's wealthier communities. There are plenty who view the PRD's track record as limited and lacking inspiration, sharing the same tendencies toward authoritarianism and corruption as the other political

parties. Although AMLO asked his followers to stage sit-ins in front of Oaxaca's 11 electoral districts, this happened in only three. According to Oaxaca University's academic dean, not more than a couple dozen buses went from Oaxaca to Mexico City in support of Obrador's recent demonstrations. "Most Oaxacans are sympathetic towards AMLO, but there's no connection between the teachers protest and AMLO's electoral challenge," he commented. There's a sense among some right-leaning members of the elite that AMLO is playing with fire by calling for nationwide protests and that neither he nor anyone else may be able to control the forces he is trying to unleash. "If the country becomes ungovernable, as Oaxaca is becoming," asked one political observer, "who will save Mexico?"

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